The Strategic Partner

SQM Pre Audit / Pre-Application Service

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1. Introduction

Keeping up to date with the latest Standards and Guidance in terms of all your policies, procedures, reviews and controls can be a time-consuming task, particularly for those who still have a busy caseload to handle.

Our SQM (Specialist Quality Mark) Pre-Audit / Pre-Application Service is designed to assist firms in both obtaining and maintaining SQM accreditation.

We work with the law firm to ensure that the necessary policies, processes and reviews are in place and assist with both the documentation and evidencing of the requirements for the Standard.

This service has been designed to assist those in the firm to identify and take the necessary actions when applying for SQM or preparing for their 3year renewal.

The SQM framework is based on the following key quality areas:

- access to service
- seamless service
- running the organisation
- people management
- running the service
- meeting clients' needs
- commitment to quality

We realise that audits can be stressful and time consuming, particularly for senior staff involved in the process.

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Having the support of TSP through the process, provides you with professional advice and guidance on meeting the SQM Standard, saving your senior team time in the process and the knowledge that you are working with an experienced and knowledgeable provider reduces some of that audit stress and burden.

Our service includes staff interviews and file reviews to focus your team on making sure that they have all the required knowledge to pass their interview and that the Standard's requirements are working in practice and evident on a good sample of your closed files. This should then flag any potential gaps and assist you in making sure that current files are also compliant for selection by your auditor on the day.

2. Our Service – an overview

Our pre-audit service includes reviewing your compliance in all seven of the required areas, identifying any gaps and reporting to you. We will achieve this through

- **Reviewing the firm's policies and procedures** – this is to ensure the firm's policies and procedures meet the requirements of SQM Standard and to identify any required updates.
- **Interviewing staff** – We will interview a good sample of your staff to ensure they have a sufficiently good working knowledge of the firm's policies and procedures relevant to SQM, and that they fully understand the firm's approach, enabling them to answer the key questions asked by SQM auditors.
- **File Review** - Undertaking file reviews on a sample of closed files to ensure that the processes and procedures are demonstrated on file and confirm that the standard has been met for file reviews. For an additional fee (see fee table below), we can also perform your ongoing SQM file reviews through a site attendance or remotely via your case management system (if accessible).
- **Preparation** – Completion of the necessary application and preparing a pack of documents and information for the assessment once you are satisfied that everything is in place, including liaising with the auditor in advance of the audit.
- **Attendance** – where necessary attending site for the audit day to work with the firm and the auditor as required.

We can also provide the firm with updated policies, procedures, plans and record forms if required - please refer to our Risk, Regulation and Compliance Service (which also includes AML where relevant to the firm), which provides a set of compliant policies and more.

https://www.thestrategicpartner.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Risk-Regulation-and-Compliance-Service-including-AML.pdf

3. What is included – the detail

3.1 Plans, procedures and policies

The policies and procedures review will include: -

- Reviewing the contents of your Business Plan, including any projects, services, accompanying marketing plan etc. and periodic reviews.
- Reviewing your non-discrimination (equality & diversity) policy for compliance, including recruitment, training and third party/expert selection.
- Reviewing your signposting and referral procedure and checking that accompanying referral records are compliant, and signposting documents are up to date and circulated amongst staff.
- Checking your firm's records are up to date on the Legal Adviser & Mediator Finder service.
- Reviewing your organisational and supervision charts, and key responsibilities document.
- Checking financial processes within the Firm, including what documents are produced and how often they are reviewed and by whom, including budgets, quarterly variance analysis, profit and loss, balance sheet.
- Reviewing your financial reviews records.
- Checking that you have and can produce certified or audited accounts.
- Reviewing all staff job descriptions and generic job descriptions for recruitment.
- Reviewing your recruitment process and checking your latest recruitment records, including job advertisements and selection records.

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- Reviewing your staff appraisal process and records.
- Reviewing your induction process and records.
- Reviewing all individual training plans and accompanying review records.
- Reviewing all training records, including reviewing supervisor training records.
- Reviewing supervision arrangements and (checking latest Supervisor Checklists, if you have copies) ascertaining competent standards have been met and what arrangements are in place for regular supervision.
- Considering your case allocation methods and caseworker qualifications.
- Reviewing your library records and any online legal reference methods.
- Obtaining open and closed file lists from your case management system.
- Reviewing the firm's confidentiality arrangements and documentation.
- Checking what privacy arrangements for clients are in place on site.
- Reviewing your complaints procedure and all documentation connected to it, including complaint records and reviews of trends.
- Reviewing and critiquing your client feedback system. Considering records and reviews.
- Checking for quality concerns raised with the Quality Representative and that required action has been undertaken.
- Reviewing general contents of your Office Procedures Manual for written confirmation that all SQM required practices and procedures have been implemented and that policies are kept up to date.

This comprehensive document review will ensure that your policies and procedures are up to date with the requirements of the standard and best practice. It will identify any updates required and make recommendations.

3.2 File Reviews

The file review process will include reviewing a good sample of your closed files as follows and identifying any gaps for you to tackle on your current files before the audit: -

- Checking that you have effective measures in place for identifying conflicts, locating files and documents, maintaining key date backups, keeping records of undertakings given and discharged, monitoring file inactivity, and identifying linked matters and that these are evident on your files.
- Checking that the file archiving process is taking place regularly and that file records allow for easy retrieval.
- Checking case files are neat and orderly, are in chronological order and that key information is recorded clearly upon them (key dates, undertakings, funding limitations, case status and recent action).
- Checking that client care letters contain the required content, including costs information.
- Checking for file dormancy over 6month periods.
- Checking that periodic costs reviews have been undertaken and communicated to the client, including any potential costs liabilities, statutory charge etc.
- Reviewing your file review system, records of reviews for required content and caseworker file lists. Confirming that any remedial action required has been undertaken. Reviewing annual review records and consideration of whether negative trends have been targeted.
- Checking compliance of client records where one-off advice has been provided.
- Reviewing complex files for case plans, checking content and ensuring regular reviews and updates are undertaken.
- Where changes in fee earner have taken place, that the client has been advised in writing.
- Checking end of case client care letters contain the required content.
- Confirming that supplier reviews are completed each time a new expert is used and that the supplier reviews and records are kept up to date and actively used by staff when selecting experts.

- Checking how expert selection is decided upon with the client and considering subsequent written confirmation letters for required content.
- Checking for clear written instructions to experts, either by letter or formal Brief.

An essential part of an audit is to ensure that the work you do reflects the requirements of the Standard or where it does not, to identify issues for rectification. The files should demonstrate that your staff are meeting the requirements and evidence your supervision.

We can check that the contents of your supervisor file reviews demonstrate sufficient supervision in accordance with the Standard and meet its requirements.

If you would also like us to review a sample of your current files, we can visit you onsite or undertake remote reviews depending on the capabilities of your case management system. See fee table on the next page.

3.3 Staff Interviews

- Interviewing a selection of staff regarding the operation of your signposting and referral procedure, supervision and case allocation.
- Discussing with relevant staff how experts are chosen and allocated to cases.
- Confirming that staff are able to identify a complaint and the action they should take.
- Generally raising awareness of the Standard and ensuring there is the expected level of understanding required.
- Identify training needs to ensure training is delivered.

3.4 Reporting

We will produce a report with our findings, identifying any gaps in meeting the Standard and making recommendations.

The outcome will be discussed with those involved in the process enabling actions to be understood, agreed and taken.

4. The Cost

Service	Members Price	Non Members Price
The Main Service		
Offsite document review, 1 day of file reviews and up to 6 staff interviews and reporting with recommendations	£3000	£3500
Optional Services		
Completing Renewal Application and document pack	£500	£750
Additional File Reviews – note additional audits days can be added through the year	£1200	£1500
Additional Interviews (per half day)	£600	£750
Attendance for the day of the review	£1200	£1500
Policy updates and writing	By agreement	By agreement

Any additional services required by the firm will be quoted as required.

5. About TSP

The Strategic Partner is a knowledge hub, consultancy, and service provider for law firms, Professional Indemnity Insurers and those who interact with the Legal industry.

Our focus is to provide quality services to all clients, enriching their businesses with our knowledge and expertise and becoming an integrated and valuable asset.

We have developed a range of packaged and bespoke services and solutions for both the Legal and Insurance Sectors which are all aimed at bringing intelligence, efficiency and where appropriate, enhanced profitability.

Our goal is to become a truly valued partner to all businesses we work with and to assist them with any challenges they face to overcome them and strengthen their business. We pride ourselves on the depth and breadth of our knowledge and experience alongside, that of our Partners and will work with both law firms and insurers of all sizes to achieve their goals wherever possible.

6. Enquiries

For more information about our **SQM Pre-Audit/Pre-Application Service** call us on 020 3911 9710 or email us at info@thestrategicpartner.co.uk.

Essential business services to empower your law firm